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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in a foreign language combined with knowledge and skills in another professional area is highly desirable in the marketplace. Business places the greatest emphasis on this combination, although language skills rank well below other selection factors. Most employers provide language training when necessary, but the amount of time available and the level of proficiency attained are usually very limited. Many employees become discouraged at the magnitude of the language learning task. An employee with a solid language knowledge and business or managerial skills has a competitive edge over other job applicants, and bilingual individuals are in great demand. Miscommunication that occurs when employees do not have foreign language skills can mean missed opportunities and unsuccessful business dealings. Many secondary and postsecondary schools have developed nontraditional, interdisciplinary foreign language courses as a result of this need and of general dissatisfaction with traditional language instruction. Study or work abroad is often included in the program. The integration of career and foreign language studies contributes significantly to both the business community and the foreign language education profession, filling a critical need and leading to increasingly successful global interactions. (Author/MSE)

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HOW FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY
CAN ENHANCE CAREER POSSIBILITIES

ERIC Digest

December 1987

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Washington, D.C.

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ERIC Digest

How Foreign Language Study

Can Enhance Career Possibilities

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December 1987

In What Fields Are Foreign Language Skills Important?

Proficiency in a foreign language, combined with knowledge of and skills in another professional area, is highly desirable in the marketplace. While fields such as librarianship, government and politics, and some areas of education seek employees who possess foreign language proficiency in addition to expertise in their particular discipline, it is the field of business that places the greatest emphasis on both foreign language capability and knowledge of a specific subject area—areas such as management, marketing, tourism, or finance.

How Do International Businesses View Foreign Language Skills?

A number of studies have shown that American multinational firms, in selecting managers for international assignments, rely overwhelmingly on technical or professional ability as the primary criterion (Inman, 1979). The ability to adapt to a new environment, along with previous international experience, is viewed as secondarily important. A foreign language capability in and of itself ranks far below the other attributes as a selection factor. In contrast, a number of Japanese companies, for example, require a specified proficiency level in a foreign language, generally English, before an employee may be sent abroad. In other cases, notably in European companies, proficiency in English may be a hiring criterion (Inman, 1983).

Once U.S. employees have been selected for overseas assignments, a majority of employers provide (or at least make available) language and intercultural training. In most cases, proficiency in a foreign language is not required. It is generally considered "desirable but optional." Language training is ordinarily viewed as a pre-assignment or on-assignment benefit, with attendance usually voluntary. Employees themselves are often responsible for arranging for the instruction, although the employer may provide financial support. The amount of time available for language training is often severely limited, as it must compete with the press of other activities and obligations in the time available before departure.

The level of proficiency attainable in a corporate-sponsored language training program is also limited. Most companies sponsor approximately 100 hours of instruction. Only limited progress can be anticipated from such a brief

period. The underlying assumption of such a policy is that business matters will be handled in English; foreign language skills may be used socially or for getting along in everyday activities like shopping, asking directions, or requesting information. In contrast, proficiency in English is frequently required of nonnative English-speaking corporate employees, whether the company operations are in the United States or abroad. Training programs in English (as a second or foreign language) of 500 to 1000 hours and one to two years in length are common.

Many corporate executives cite the extensive use of English in international settings as the basis for their companies' policies. Some note the initial excitement of their employees followed by discouragement and even frustration as they become fully aware of the magnitude of the effort required to develop any meaningful proficiency in another language. Others state that, ideally, their representatives would speak local languages. Actual practice, however, has shown that it is a "rare occasion when professional capability, language capability, and a job assignment all come together at the same time" (Inman, 1979).

What Material Benefits Are There for Those with Foreign Language Skills?

An employee possessing a solid combination of language and business/managerial skills can have a competitive edge over others without language capability. Bilingual individuals, often those for whom English is a second language, are in great demand. A majority of companies meet their translation and interpreting needs through employees whose major responsibilities are not language-related. In a few cases, proficiency in a foreign language may result in a pay differential of up to 10% (Inman, 1985). Recently, the U.S. Army adopted a policy of providing a supplement ranging from \$25 to \$100 per month to personnel with foreign language skills. The specific amount is based on the language known, the individual's proficiency level, and the importance of a language skill to the person's work assignment (Carney, 1987).

What Problems Can Result from not Knowing a Foreign Language?

Just as improvements in the business climate have been documented where individuals with foreign language and

cross-cultural skills have been employed, so have countless blunders or inefficiencies been recorded (Ricks, Fu, & Arpan, 1974). Senior staff members of foreign firms attempting to enter the complex Chinese market, for example, often have no proficiency in Chinese, nor even a rudimentary knowledge of the social customs or economic system of the country. They are soon confronted with an unfamiliar bureaucracy and many frustrating delays.

Managers admit that miscommunication occurs fairly frequently. In business dealings, details and nuances of meaning are often missed or misinterpreted by individuals lacking real proficiency in the language being used, although all parties may believe they understand each other. Managers are quite certain that their overall business and daily operations run more smoothly with employees who are proficient in the foreign language. They also know that communication problems mean more time required for negotiations and business dealings. As a result, efficiency suffers, and decisions are often made on the basis of incomplete data. Managers also report difficulty in establishing rapport with their foreign counterparts, as well as limited opportunities for social interactions due to their lack of language proficiency.

Perhaps even more significant than a lack of foreign language capability, however, is cross-cultural misunderstanding. Corporate leaders note that difficulties often occur where "methods of analysis and motivation differ." Of special concern are the "different approaches to solving problems, getting cooperation, and achieving agreement," even when all communication takes place in the same language, notably English.

Although it is difficult to place a monetary value on missed opportunities or unsuccessful business dealings because of communication problems, a few companies have documented problem situations which their employees have encountered to use in subsequent training sessions.

How Have Educational Institutions Responded to the Need for Professional Language Training?

To meet this need, many colleges and universities and even secondary schools have developed and offered non-traditional, interdisciplinary foreign language courses. These programs have resulted not only from the demand of the job market, but also from the dissatisfaction of both foreign language students and employers with traditional foreign language courses that have provided learners with inadequate preparation for professional use of their foreign language skills. Foreign language curricula, then, have expanded in scope from being predominantly literature-oriented to incorporating career training or professional education. Some non-language fields, especially international business, have also begun to systematically include foreign language study in their requirements. In such programs, the content of non-language courses is frequently presented in the foreign language, thus mutually reinforcing the two disciplines. A period of study and work abroad is also a common feature of such integration.

Economic interdependence among nations and renewed American interest in other cultures and peoples have led to increasing enrollments in foreign language courses, particularly in Pacific Rim languages. An emphasis on cross-cultural concerns is implicit in all such courses. In addition, student and faculty exchanges figure prominently in most international programs.

The integration of career and foreign language studies contributes significantly to both the business community and the foreign language education profession. It fills a critical need in both disciplines and is leading to increasingly successful global interactions.

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